

This transcript of the T/TAC William & Mary podcast *Mother and Son Share the Impact of the I'm Determined Project* (2017)

Cami: Hello and welcome. Thank you in advance for listening to our podcast. Today we will be doing an interview with one of our youth leaders from the I'm Determined Program and his mother. Our hope with this podcast is that by the end our listeners will have a deeper more personal understanding of the benefits to learning to lead and or help your children or students to lead more self-determined lives. I'm Cami Williams with the Training & Technical Assistance Center for the Virginia Department of Education at the College of William & Mary and today I'm here with Jonathan Brooks, a youth leader from the I'm Determined Program and his mother Tiffany Burton. Hello, you two and thank you for joining me today and agreeing to do this interview.

Jonathan: Thank Cami. Thanks for having us.

Tiffany: Thanks for having us Cami.

Cami: You're welcome. I'm really excited so let's jump right into our questions. Jonathan, as a student has your relationship with your teachers or guidance counselors changed since learning more about self-determination and becoming so involved with I'm Determined?

Jonathan: Yes Cami, my relationship with my guidance counselor has changed since becoming a part of this great project because they have seen me advocate for myself and really improve on my IEP.

Cami: Awesome and just as an extension of that question. Has your relationship with other students changed? How you interact with other classmates or just other students at your school?

Jonathan: Yes ma'am, some of my friends are like Jonathan, "How did you do this"? "How do you get to these classes?" I'm like all you have to do is just ask and just make sure that you advocate for yourself and you speak up when you want to.

Cami: Absolutely. It sounds like it is something so simple, but it's one of those things that you don't think about when you are in the moment. Like just ask.

Jonathan: Yes ma'am.

Cami: So Tiffany same question, but from a parent perspective. Has your relationship and how you interact with the schools and teachers changed since Jonathan has become more involved with I'm Determined?

Tiffany: Absolutely. Jonathan had an incident over the summer with his schedule. The guidance counselor said he wasn't in a certain class because he was in special education classes and from my perspective because I've been involved in the I'm Determined program, I was able to advocate for **Jonathan** and really get to the bottom of why he was not in the class instead of just accepting her say, "It's because he is in special education classes". So we resolved the issue tactfully and he will be in the class next year.

Cami: That's awesome and we are going to talk a little bit about the parents involvement with the Parent's Summit later on in the interview, but that's an awesome point and a great story because not only does I'm Determined impact how Jonathan as a student interacts with the administration and teachers at school, but also his parents. So Jonathan tell me what does the self-determined version of Jonathan look and sound like.

Jonathan: The self-determined version of Jonathan looks like me speaking up for myself basically and when I have things I have questions about, I really ask those questions and make sure that I understand and know what they are basically saying and not hiding anything that I don't know about.

Cami: Awesome. So how does that differ from the Jonathan that existed before your involvement with I'm Determined.

Jonathan: Before I'm Determined I was really timid and I accepted the fact that I had a disability and that my counselors limited me from classes that I could take, but now I know that I can do anything and take classes that I want to and I know that I can do anything I set my mind to.

Cami: Oh, I love that. You can do anything you set your mind to. Absolutely! So you had a specific example about that with a class you wanted to take. Tell us a little about that.

Jonathan: Yes ma'am. I wanted to take culinary arts 1 for my freshman of year high school and my guidance counselor, as my mother said, told me that I could not take that class because I was specifically in a special ed. class and so we told her that I wanted to take that class and this year when I did my class registration I made sure I told her that I wanted to do culinary arts 1 and I have no special ed. classes this year and I'm taking culinary arts 1 next year.

Cami: Oh, alright! And what grade are you in this year?

Jonathan: I'm a sophomore at Lee Davis High School.

Cami: Ok. So you are a sophomore. And so you are going to take that class next year. That's great where as before you probably would have just accepted ok the guidance counselor said I can't take it so I guess I can take it. Right?

Jonathan: Yes, ma'am.

Cami: And now you know that, that is not the case. That you can still push to do the things that you want to do just like everyone else.

Jonathan: Absolutely.

Cami: Awesome. So kind of pigging back off of that. Jonathan, what would you say your experience with I'm Determined has done for your self-esteem? How has your view of yourself changed since becoming more self-determined?

Jonathan: My self-esteem has also changed dramatically Cami. I have, as I said earlier, I know that I can set my mind to anything that I want, I can be whoever I want, and just because I have a disability I can't really... I don't have to limit myself to what I can and can't do. And the I'm Determined project is just a great project that can open your mind set to different possibilities and aspects of life.

Cami: Oh, different possibilities and aspects of life. That's powerful right there. I love that. Tiffany, again from the parent's perspective because you know we love our children and we watch our children so I'm sure you've seen a change in somethings. So what are some specific things you have noticed as a parent that have made school a more positive experience since Jonathan has been involved in I'm Determined?

Tiffany: Jonathan's confidence has increased tremendously. The administrative staff even recognizes that Jonathan is a new person and is not shy. They have nominated him for several awards this year. Just because they see how confident he is and how he enjoys speaking up and

being an advocate for himself and he is very respectful about it and he is just a really great kid and when they recognize that, I was blown away. It really touched me.

Cami: A proud mama moment.

Tiffany: That's right.

Cami: Congratulations Jonathan on your rewards.

Jonathan: Thank you Cami.

Cami: That is amazing! As you were saying that again, I was thinking about how important you know when you are an advocate, one of the things you just said was is that he does it in a respectful way and I think that is extremely important to understand that there is a difference from maybe causing a scene or you know blowing your top and being respectful and being heard you know when you are in a position that you feel you are right and that maybe there is something that can be done a little bit differently and I applaud Jonathan for being so respectful because as a youth leader that is something I definitely notice about him time and time again. He is always extremely respectful.

Jonathan: Thank you Cami.

Cami: You are welcome. So Tiffany this question is for you. I know you have a younger son so when you attend the Youth Summit and the MOVE conferences, you do so with your younger son. What do you feel are benefits to having him witness what goes on at those events?

Tiffany: Jordan by attending the MOVE event and the I'm Determined event, Jordan has gained this tremendous respect for Jonathan and it touches my heart because when I had to explain to him "you know that Jonathan has a learning disability and that is why we attend these" and he said, "I don't want anyone making fun of my brother." I love him so much and I am so proud of him and so when he comes all he keeps saying is "I'm so proud that Jonathan is my brother". "I'm so proud of my brother". So him being there just sees how Jonathan is... he looks up to Jonathan. He sees that he is this great person and the best thing is that it's his brother so it really means a lot to me.

Cami: Oh that is... Jonathan you are an idol. That is an amazing story. I mean that's just a great perspective with the I'm Determined Youth and Parent Summit and the MOVE Conferences they are family friendly events. They are not just for the participant and just for the parent. They are for the families that also attend and so I think it is wonderful that even though Jordan is not an active participant in those events, that he is getting something out of this and he is seeing your self-determination Jonathan and what it is doing for you so you can only image how that's going to help him as he grows and is you know a 10th grader just like you.

Jonathan: Yes, ma'am.

Tiffany: Yeah.

Cami: So Tiffany do you think that having these experiences with Jonathan will change your approach with Jordan's education?

Tiffany: Absolutely. I am all ears now. I've been that way since he was in kindergarten because that is when Jon basically started the I'm Determined program and so I know what to listen for, I know what to look for and it has helped so, so much.

Cami: Oh, that is amazing. I love hearing stories of how I'm Determined is you know going above and beyond the intended purposes. You know we intend to empower the youth and empower the parents for their journey, but it's branching out and is helping to empower your journey you know with another one of your children.

Tiffany: Absolutely.

Cami: I want to close with this question to you both to basically speak to students out there that might be listening, teachers out there, guidance counselors and even parents who are still wondering why should I get involved with this I'm Determined thing. Or why should be involved with MOVE. So

Jonathan: What would you say to convenience a teacher to start incorporating some self-determination skills or tools into his or her classroom?

Jonathan: I would just let the teacher know that I'm Determined is just an outstanding program over all and it helps the students know that there are people out there who care for them and who want them to get through tough times that they have in school and we want them to handle them, of course as you said, respectfully and let them know that they can self-advocate for themselves and they basically can make a difference in theirs or someone else's life.

Cami: And what about to a student. How would you convince a student to incorporate some of the self-determination skills in their lives? Like for instance, how would you convince them maybe a goal sheet is a good idea, or a one-pager or maybe a good day plan, or simple asking more questions when they meet with the guidance counselor or meet with a teacher. How would you convince them you know that they may want to get on a path to being more self-determined.

Jonathan: I would simply say that for instance the good day plan. If they have problems with anger or showing emotion than the good day plan really helps them put together their day. How they are going to have breakfast in the morning with their family. Go to school. Get all the work that they need to get done and when they come home to do the homework and actually accomplish it and then have that time to spend with their family at the end of the day. And again. It's just an amazing program and I think the student would benefit from it tremendously and it would have a significant impact on their life. Just like it did for me.

Cami: Well thank you so much. I'm convinced. So Tiffany. What are you most thankful for after becoming so involved with I'm Determined and MOVE?

Tiffany: I'm most thankful for the friendships and connections that Jonathan has made and by him being a leader, it has brought him so much joy. I can see the joy and excitement in his eyes and it just comes across so much when he has to do a conference or if he has to go to a meeting for I'm Determined. It just brings him so much joy and that's what I like to see as a parent. You want to see your child happy and full of joy. And that is what this program has done for him. So I'm just thankful that I can see joy in my sweet boy.

Cami: Oh, that is so sweet. Jonathan, you have an awesome mom. And mom you have an awesome son.

Jonathan: I do.

Tiffany: Thank you.

Cami: You're welcome. So I will say that we didn't talk a lot about. Well I didn't ask you questions about the Youth and Parent Summit or the MOVE Conference specifically because I don't want to this to be simply let's come to this huge conference you know and that's it. I want listeners to understand

that there is more to I'm Determined than just the week-long conference for Youth and Parent Summit and the three days that we spend at the MOVE Conference, but I would like them to know about those two events. So Jonathan I'll let you pick one the Youth and Parent Summit or the MOVE Conference and just tell us a little bit about it from your perspective. Tell everyone what it is, who it's for and when it is.

Jonathan: I'm going to pick the Youth and Parent Summit because that's the one that I think I love the most. It's for students that are in middle and high school and who are having trouble with just finding out what their disability is and what they can and cannot do and we come together June 13-16 this year. Just to help them realize that one they are not alone, two they can set their mind to anything in the world and they can accomplish it and really helps them. We've have lots of students that say "I want to come back" if it was their first time. Because it really helps you understand what I'm Determined is, how it helps you, and what you can do potentially in the future.

Cami: Awesome and Tiffany what about the Parent Summit portion of that. How would you describe that to other parents?

Tiffany: I would say when they first come it seems a bit overwhelming, but by the end you gain so much knowledge as to how to help your child and it's kind of relaxing to know that there are other parents out there that are going through the same things that you are going through and it is just a great benefit to have someone out there that knows what you feel and can be there to help you.

Cami: That is what we want everyone to gain out of those conferences. Just leave more empowered than when you came. Leave with more information than when you got there and I glad to hear you feel that that's exactly what you get when you come to the Youth and Parent Summit. Then I'll do MOVE. MOVE is a conference that's also in the summer usually in July and that is for African American Males in middle and high school that have a disability and it's very similar to the Youth and Parent Summit because the parents also have sessions and information that they are going to get as long as the young men that come to that. So those are both awesome I'm Determined events, but I'm Determined is so much bigger than that. So if you would like more information about I'm Determined, please visit our website at imdetermined.org where you can find information about the Youth and Parent Summit, the MOVE Conference, and have access to a ton of resources for students, resources for parents, and resources for teachers as well. So Jonathan and Tiffany I want to thank you both for taking your time out of your evening and talking with me today and answering all my questions. So thank you so much.

Tiffany: Thank you.

Jonathan: Thank you.

Cami: Thank you for everything. I've enjoyed it and I believe that we have done what we have set out to do. Which was to give listeners a more in-depth explanation of why learning how to use your own voice and advocate for yourself is such an important life skill. Would you agree that we have done that today?

Jonathan: Absolutely.

Tiffany: That's right.

Cami: Yes, we are a power team. Well thank you so much and thank you to all of our listeners.